

# Illinois Tollway board approves \$25 million Route 53 study

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The Illinois Tollway board on Thursday unanimously approved spending \$25 million for an environmental impact study on a long-discussed proposed extension of Route 53 from Cook County into Lake County.

The 8-0 vote came after more than two hours of comments from people for and against the controversial project. Representatives from several construction companies spoke in favor of the study, saying the extension would bring jobs and relieve congestion in a growing region. Environmental groups and officials from the suburbs of Hawthorn Woods and Long Grove spoke against, noting the extension's projected \$2.65 billion cost and its potential negative impact on wetlands.

The contract to study the extension was awarded to two engineering firms — CH2M Hill and Knight E/A Inc., based in Englewood, Colo., and Chicago, respectively. Both have worked with the Tollway before.

Board chairman Robert Schillerstrom said the study, which is expected to take three to five years, will provide a fact-based evaluation on alternatives that will achieve the most congestion relief for the region while balancing environmental impacts.

"Every day, Lake and McHenry County families and businesses are faced with traffic congestion that means time away from their families and lost productivity at work," said Schillerstrom in a statement. "The region needs a comprehensive, long-term solution to reduce traffic gridlock."

Discussed since the 1960s, the proposed project would create a T-shaped tollway, with an extended Route 53 making up the north/south portion and a widened Illinois Route 120 creating the top east/west portion, for about 25 miles of new and improved roads. The Route 53 extension would run from suburban Arlington Heights to Grayslake.

The proposal has already seen three previous environmental impact studies. A blue ribbon advisory council formed in 2011 of public officials and representatives from business, environmental and other interest groups favored a four-lane boulevard with a maximum speed of 45 mph and a number of environmental features.

The planning has never gotten to shovels in the ground, and some key backers have withdrawn their support, including the two council co-chairs, George Ranney and Lake County Board Chair Aaron Lawlor. Some Lake County officials have turned their attention to pushing for improvements to congested Route 120, whether or not the 53 extension ever happens.

Former Tollway board member Bill Morris of Grayslake told the Tollway board that Lake County is being held prisoner by the Route 53 proposal, which has delayed other needed projects like Route 120 and Route 83 improvements.

"Please let us out of Route 53 prison," said Morris.

The Tollway board heard from multiple proponents of the extension on Thursday and also received 250 letters in favor of the environmental impact study, as opposed to 60 letters against.

Among those writing in favor was Leon Rockingham, Jr., mayor of North Chicago and chair of the Lake Council of Mayors. Rockingham noted that the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning has listed the project as a priority in their "Go to 2040" regional plan.

"Of all the capital projects in the region, it appears that this one has the largest congestion reduction benefits and the largest economic impact," Rockingham wrote. He noted that congestion and travel times continue to increase in the region, with studies showing a 98-minute commute from Grayslake to Schaumburg.

"It's no secret that traffic congestion is only going to get worse," said Illinois Chamber of Commerce Infrastructure Council Executive Director Ben Brockschmidt, in a statement. "Reducing congestion is not only good for the environment, it's also good for economic development."

Long Grove President Bill Jacob told the board that the extension would increase traffic on already strained east/west routes in the region and attract unwanted sprawl.

Last month, the U.S. Public Interest Research Group, a consumer advocacy organization, included the proposed Route 53 extension in its list of the country's most wasteful highway boondoggles.

Livable Lake County, a coalition that opposes the extension, has charged that moving ahead with the project violates the Illinois Tollway Act, in part because there is no Lake County representative on the board.

Backers for the project include the Illinois Economic Policy Institute, a think tank whose board members include representatives of the construction industry and labor unions. The institute did a poll last month, which found that 66 percent of 400 voters favored the extension.

Under the blue ribbon advisory council's framework, the road could be funded with tolls of 20 cents per mile — about three times the Tollway average — a 4 cent per gallon fuel tax and a capture of real estate tax revenues.

Tollway board member and Elk Grove Village President Craig Johnson said the study would allow those with questions and concerns about the extension to be part of the discussion.

"We will guarantee you are part of the process," said Johnson, who noted that the study may conclude that the extension should not be built.

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